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The People Get Their Say

Local pols hear opinions on war

By Elaine S. Povich
WASHINGTON BUREAU

March 26, 2003

Washington - U.S. House members from Long Island and Queens, trying to do their part to assist constituents in a time of war, have been fielding questions from students, setting up help links on their Web sites and keeping track of opinions phoned in to their offices.

Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington) met yesterday with students from J. Taylor Finley Middle School in Huntington and showed them how to e-mail the troops fighting their way to Baghdad. The students had a lot of questions about the war, Israel said, and many of them "feel so overwhelmed and out of control by the war news that this is a way to make them have a connection [to the troops] in a positive way."

Israel shared a sampling of the e-mails the students wrote: "I can't thank you enough for what you are doing," a student named Tori wrote to a Navy service member. "I hope you get back safely. I don't know if I could do what you are doing. I would probably be too scared to go into war."

Another student, Becca, wrote: "Our country is so grateful to have people like you fighting for America. You must be truly brave."

Israel said the opinions of the students came out during his talk yesterday. "One of the students even took me on," said Israel, who voted to authorize the president to go to war. "She said she would have voted against the resolution [to go to war]. She said war is never an option."

Messages can be sent to the troops at www.OperationDearAbby.com. The idea is based on a letter-writing campaign begun by the advice columnist in 1967. Concerns about dangers in the mail have stopped the military from accepting letters addressed to "Any Service Member," but e-mail sent through the site will get to military personnel, the Congress members said.

Israel and other House members, including Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-Mineola), have links on their Web sites to the e-mail site. McCarthy also has provided links for those who want to help out reservists' families who may be suffering financial hardship while their relative has been called to active duty. Through a series of links, people can make a donation that will help needy families buy food and other supplies at military post exchanges.

"Reservist families can come to the site to find out how to get the help they need," McCarthy said. She said schools, in particular, are asking how they can help the families, and McCarthy refers them to Web sites where they can send mail and make donations.


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"They want to get involved, whether they are for the war or against the war," she said.

McCarthy said mail and e-mail sent to her from constituents in her Nassau district has dropped off dramatically since the war began. Both Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-Brooklyn) and a spokesman for Rep. Tim Bishop (D-Southampton) said their e-mail has been running heavily against the war. Weiner said that was to be expected, since those who are for the war effort generally don't write or call. But, Weiner said, at two town meetings held earlier this week in Kew Gardens Hills and Middle Village, most people had questions about the war, rather than strong opinions like those found in street demonstrations.

"People are genuinely conflicted about it," Weiner said. "People are uneasy about the war and conflicted about the war; people don't have the cockiness that they are sure they are right."

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